

Over 500,000 people view reading of Palestinian poem by US actor Mahershala Ali

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On Thursday, the Palestine Festival of Literature posted to its Twitter/X account a poem by young Palestinian poet Mohammed al-Qudwa, currently trapped in Gaza and exposed, like the rest of the population, to the threat of death, mutilation, hunger or expulsion by the Israeli regime. The poem, read by US actor Mahershala Ali, has received more than 560,000 views as of this writing.

Not only does this reception of the poem on social media demonstrate the public's abiding anger and horror at the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza by the Israeli murder machine, but it also shows that poetry—often declared as a marginalized or dead art form—can move masses of people when it speaks of the deep feelings of the oppressed.

This is the reason the Zionist state is not only waging war against civilians, but against the very recognition and memory of its crimes. One of the main goals of the Israeli government has been to exterminate the journalists in Gaza who report on it. At this writing at close to 200 journalists have been killed, in addition to members of their families.

The situation of artists in Gaza and Palestine in general is similar. It is not only the current genocide trial before the International Court of Justice that will cast infamy on the Zionist state, but the possibility of significant poems, novels, plays and films that will document the agony of the Palestinian people and inspire millions to oppose Zionism and imperialism.

As the WSWs noted last week, “The Zionists are acutely aware of the need to wipe out both witnesses of their murder spree in general and, specifically, anyone who might be capable of representing the terrible events in important creative work.”

To this end, On December 6, the Zionist state assassinated Dr. Refaat al-Ar'eer, a prominent author

and academic in Gaza, along with his brother, sister and four of his nephews and nieces, after the Israel Defense Forces made several death threats. The poet Mosab Abu Toha was detained and beaten by the IDF as he was fleeing Gaza. He was released only after an international outcry.

The Palestine Festival of Literature, which produced the video, takes place annually in several Palestinian cities, such as Jerusalem, Ramallah, Haifa and Nablus, because the Israeli occupation limits the ability of Palestinians to travel. Its events in Gaza have been restricted because of the Israeli blockade in recent years.

The festival presents readings and performances by Palestinian writers and other artists. Festival patrons have included Chinua Achebe, John Berger, Mahmoud Darwish, Seamus Heaney, Harold Pinter, Philip Pullman and Emma Thompson.

After the assassination of Refaat al-Ar'eer, the festival, on December 12, posted on its Twitter/X feed a reading of al-Ar'eer's poem “If I Must Die” read by British actor Brian Cox. The reading has been viewed 13 million times.

Mohammed al-Qudwa's poem is read memorably and powerfully by Mahershala Ali, who won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, as well as other honors, for his role in *Moonlight* (2016) and again for Best Supporting Actor in 2019 for his role in *Greenbook*. He is well known for his starring role as Arkansas police state detective Wayne Hays in the 2017 HBO series *True Detective*.

Ali is a member of Artists4Ceasefire, which has called on the US government to demand a ceasefire to the Israeli devastation in Gaza. He notes on the video clip before reading the poem: “If we work for a ceasefire and freedom for Palestine, one of the many

things we can do is help families who are trying to reach safety today.”

Mohammed al-Qudwa says in a GoFundMe appeal for funds to evacuate his family and himself from Gaza: “I have a sister and a brother. My sister is a dental student in Egypt, but she finished her studies the previous year and had an internship year in dentistry, so she had to leave the country, but the war broke out, and my brother suffered from a head injury and a tumor.”

His “Longing for Haifa,” speaks of the longing for this city, and by implication the desire of Palestinians to return to their land. The city which was taken by the Hagenah, the predecessor of the Israel Defense Forces in a campaign of terror and ethnic cleansing in 1947-48. Today Haifa is the third largest city in Israel, notable for its mixed Jewish and Palestinian population.

Al-Qudwa’s poem expresses feelings through images and metaphors of the current genocide in Gaza.

The WSWS is publishing the poem in its entirety in English in a translation from the Arabic supplied by the Palestine Festival of Literature.

“Longing for Haifa”

by Mohammed al-Qudwa

I comb with my eyes the seafront for the last time

I wait

for a ship.

A sail.

Or even the stalk of an orange tree.

I want to cross

to break through the barriers of the sea

that my orange should grow fruit

to be eaten by the deep.

Perhaps it will save me

from the death of a shark.

I smile at the sea for the last time

or the one just before it

I wait for Noah’s miracle

The sea starts to move with me

to pull me towards the sun

who every day I hear calling for help

for the last time.

How many times have I compared them:

The sea, to my beloved?

Those first threads that each morning

stream like hair to her waist.

How many times did she believe me?

She knew from our coastal town

That we can’t see those dawns.

The sea still tears me apart.

Steals my limbs from me

I use one arm to swim,

the other to push away the waves.

In spite of all this I will cross

I will leave, for tomorrow, an orange

That the sea pushes out to shore.

Perhaps it will land at Haifa

And I can take root and grow there again.

The sea cannot stop my love of her hair

Nor make me forget

the final sound of the sun.



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